

Merry Christmas!

Coffee For Crows



You're in a cemetery on Christmas day with me - a stranger wearing black. You don't know how you got here; you don't even know where this yard is located. Are we in Houston? Or someplace else? London perhaps?

No. It must be Texas because it is warm; or, specifically, it isn't cold. There is an undercurrent of humidity in the air and a thin carpet of fog in the low areas, crawling over the burial plaques and clinging to the tombstone bases.

Houston, then. On Christmas day. With me - dressed as an undertaker - in a cemetery.

Yes, you know how this will end. We'll walk together for a stretch; during which time I'll make profound, oddly specific comments about your life, and then I'll point towards a stone and you'll gasp at the engraving.

So tedious.

And what comes after; even more so: You, on your knees before me, slicking my shoes with tears, begging for another chance.

What's that? A cold day in hell, you say? Maybe so. For in my heart I do believe there must be a man who will face up to his life - every aspect of it; the deep, unforgiving and shameful failures as well as the small, meaningless triumphs - and look upon his reward with clear eyes and steady nerves. Just because I haven't met that man yet....

Oh? This shovel that suddenly appeared in my hand? And a bible in the other, yes, tools of the trade.

Ha! Why would you even try to snatch the shovel away? Are you so foolish?

Well, here. Take it then.

And now? Strike me about the head? Drive the spade into my heart? What are you waiting for?

Ha ha ha! No. You hold it. Carry it for me while we walk. Here's what I promise, then,

in return - no pandering speeches about your fruitless, wasted life. Not a word of the enumerable missed opportunities and mistakes you've willfully made during your brief years. Instead, I will entertain you with tales of those whom I've encountered here before.

Unseemly, perhaps, to tell stories out of school. Certainly not the behavior of a gentleman. But fuck it. I like you. You've got spunk.

And, though you are indeed a miserable, ravaged specimen of humanity; you are not the worst I've seen. Oh, perfect! Right here, in fact - see this stone? Mister Shane Muncie; born 1972. Died December 25th, 2016. Now here's a man who was a real sad bastard....

She didn't have to say anything, didn't even have to move one single muscle in her face, the scorn simply radiated from her like an aura.

"It's turquoise." Lynda stated, looking at the jewelry box.

"Yes," Shane beamed. "Sabrina picked it out. She's sorry she couldn't be here, but, you know.... She wishes you a merry Christmas."

Lynda sighed.

"Try it on," Shane nudged the box towards his daughter.

She capped it with the lid and said, "Later."

"So," Shane smiled. "How are things? How is school?"

"Fine," she replied. She pushed her salad around with a fork. Found a cucumber, speared it, touched it to dressing and then decided against it. She set the fork down and picked up her water glass.

Shane guzzled wine, emptied his glass, and then refilled it from the carafe on the

table.

"Did you want some?" he held the bottle out to his daughter. "I won't tell if you won't."

"No," Lynda said. "Red wine is disgusting."

Shane set the carafe down. Good thing. It was almost empty anyway.

"So...", Shane started then floundered. *So what?* Even before the divorce, he'd had little connection with his children, now that they didn't live in the same house.... What was there to talk about?

"I've got to go," Lynda said, standing abruptly.

Shane checked his watch. "But I thought you...?"

"Stacy's waiting for me outside," Lynda said, shouldering her purse. "She just text me."

"You need to eat first."

"No time."

Lynda strode quickly out of the restaurant without even saying goodbye.

"Merry Christmas," Shane said to the empty chair across the table. He picked up the turquoise necklace and jangled it in his hands.

Must be one of those new technologies, Shane thought, where you can get a text without even looking at your phone.

He drained the dregs of the wine, draped the necklace over the empty bottle, and got up to leave, tossing \$30 on the table for one salad and drinks.

"She loved the necklace," Shane, lying on the bed, told his wife. "She said she was sorry you couldn't be there. Wished you a Merry Christmas, too."

Sabrina didn't reply. She sat at the vanity, combing out her long, black hair. She wore only a bra and panties - both white against brown skin - and when she twisted sideways and leaned down to get at more of the hair, a strap fell loose exposing a firm, round breast.

After she'd finish brushing, she replaced the strap and adjusted the cup of the bra with a petite, delicate hand.

Shane swallowed.

"It's Christmas Eve, I thought we might-"

"-I need you to open the warehouse tonight," Sabrina cut him off before he could finish his sentence. "Jimmy needs to store some boxes there for a day or two."

"Well, but, I thought-"

"-Just for a day or two."

"Sure." Shane came off the bed. "Except I can't just have boxes sitting around the warehouse. Everything must be checked in, logged, and registered. What is it?"

"I don't know," Sabrina sounded annoyed. "What does it matter? You own the place, don't you? It's just for a day or two."

"I own the place, yes, but I still must follow procedure. A bunch of strange boxes around the place; what will people think?"

"They're your employees. They'll think what you tell them to." She stood up and went to the closet. Shane admired her hourglass figure as she pawed through the hanging dresses. The way her shoulder blades moved; dark skin looking warm and inviting in the soft, boudoir light....

"Look, I'm running late," Sabrina said. "You need to have the warehouse open by midnight. Jimmy said they'll be there after midnight, so have it unlocked, okay?"

"Okay, but...", Shane tried to hug her from behind, but she moved too quickly; snatching a red dress and heading for the full-length mirror. "I mean, I can't just leave the warehouse unlocked all night," he said, tucking his hands in his pockets.

"Then leave the key for Jimmy." She stepped into the dress. There was a zipper in back, but she didn't need any help. A quick, deft move with practiced hands and she was ready. "Hide it under a rock or something and give him a call. Tell him where it's at."

Shane sat down on the bed. "Sure, because this is still the '70s and we haven't invented electronic security systems yet. He'll need the code, too."

Sabrina looked over her shoulder and gave Shane a withering look. "So. Tell him the code."

Shane snorted a laugh. "Yeah, right."

Sabrina turned to face her husband. With her hands on her hips, she tilted her head slightly. Her eyes narrowed. "He's my brother," she said with enough ice in her voice to freeze vodka.

"No, I know," Shane immediately lost whatever attitude he'd been building. "It's not that. I just can't because of insurance reasons. If I told anybody, I'd lose my insur-"

"-Then I guess you're spending the night at the warehouse." Sabrina interrupted. She snatched some items from her dresser and quit the room.

"Hey!" Shane called after her. "When will you be home? It's Christmas Eve-"

The front door slammed for an answer.

Nothing is worse, Shane knew, than being stuck in a bad marriage. Two miserable people living under one ice-cold roof; never talking, never touching.... Enter any room and feel the disdain. It's in the walls like asbestos; covered up with lead paint.

Add a couple of kids to the mix and, congratulations, you've done your part to keep the legacy of despair going strong.

No way. Not for Shane Muncie. It took a while - too long, probably - for him to figure it out, but once he saw the truth about his life and relationships, he knew it had to change.

Unfortunately, there were too many hard years, too many irretrievable criticisms between him and his wife that could never be forgiven. And so, he came to understand that there was only one way to end the ceaseless flow of accusations, recriminations, and outrage in his house.

Love, Shane realized. Love was the only way out of hate.

So Shane divorced his wife of twenty years and took up with a fine young girl from the Island of Macnas.

True love.

And this time around, Shane was committed to doing anything and everything to make the relationship work.

That's how Shane found himself alone in a chill warehouse on Christmas Eve, sitting on a crate nursing a bottle of spiced rum waiting for some guys to show up with a truck.

But it was all good. At least Sabrina would be happy he did her this favor....

No, wait! Feel that itch? That nagging, aggravating itch? Right there in the back of

your skull - not on the skin, no, inside the skull. An angry, red splotch spreading over your brain.... That itch telling you you're being taken for a fool, man! She's fucking using you - and she isn't even being subtle about it anymore! Where the hell is she going on Christmas Eve dressed like that? Her friends? Yeah, but did she even say that? No, you just assumed.... And what's this nonsense? You're going to let her criminal brother drop off boxes at your warehouse; no questions asked? Man, you know the crates will be loaded with stolen grip - ha! Stolen? That will be the best-case scenario. Drugs? Hell, guns? How bloody do you want your hands, boyo?

All for what? Just because she takes you in her mouth? Because she knows some tricks? Jesus, Shane! Wake up already! Your first marriage may have been horrible; but Sabrina's going to put you in a hole.

Nope. Pour some liquor on that itch, quick. There you go, feel the warmth spread.

You love Sabrina. Love her dearly and with all your heart.

There is nothing you wouldn't do for her.

Nothing.

So have another drink.

A loud noise shocked Shane out of his drunken slumber. He jerked awake with a cry; his heart hammering so hard, it felt like it was going to explode right out of his chest.

The sound again; fists against the corrugated metal bay door.

"Oh Jesus." Shane slid off the crate where he'd been slumped over, dozing with his chin on his chest. The bottle of rum fell away, but, miraculously, didn't break when it hit ground.

"Jesus." Shane picked up the liquor.

More knocking from outside. Shane heard voices, too. Impatient and angry.

"Whu whu...", Shane tried to call out, but had no breath. He paused; took a moment. Expelled a great gust of wet air. Then, finally, yelled; "Coming! Hold on!"

He staggered to the wall where the keypad swam into focus. He punched in the code then grabbed the chain to hoist the door. After a few tugs, hands appeared under the door and pushed it up fast; chain links zipping by with dizzying speed.

A truck had been backed up to the bay and three men stood in the darkness. One of them jumped into the light of the warehouse.

Shane recognized him as one of Sabrina's countrymen - a Macnasee, short and dark with lots of hair and white teeth. This one was thick in the chest, had a narrow waist, and heavily muscled arms. He wore a polo shirt, jeans, and a ridiculous red with fluffy white trim Santa hat.

"You Muncie?" the Macnasee asked. "Jimmy sent us."

"Yeah." Shane shook his hand. "Yeah, you can just set the stuff right here."

The Macnasee moved past Shane. "No, we'll put it towards the back," he said, walking around, inspecting the layout. "Somewhere out of the way."

Shane followed mutely, still trying to steady his heart and nerves.

"Here's good," the Macnasee said, and then waved towards the truck. The other two set down a ramp between the truck and the warehouse floor with a bone-rattling clang then started maneuvering cargo.

"You got some Christmas cheer there?" the Macnasee asked, pointing at Shane's hand. Shane was surprised to find he was still holding the rum. He handed it over.

The man took two large gulps then passed it back. Shane let the bottle hang limp at his side.

"Aw," the man smiled. "Don't make me drink alone. Not on Christmas day."

"Hunh?" Shane said, confused. The man pointed at the bottle.

"Or maybe you've already had enough, eh?"

"Oh, right." Shane drank. A small sip, but it helped clear his head. The Macnasee laughed and motioned for the bottle. Shane gave it to him.

"Merry Christmas," he said, gulping some more.

Shane looked at the over-sized clock hanging on the wall. It was two in the morning.

By now the other men had wheeled in a large plastic crate. Together, all three spoke in their native language, laying out a plan. When finished, the man took Shane's arm and led him away.

"My boys can handle this," he said. "Ten minutes we're gone."

Shane watched as the other two used a handcart to shuffle boxes around; moving current inventory aside so their crate could be butted against the wall.

The Macnasee drank; passed the bottle. "Hey," he said, belching. "Wait here," he swung himself out of the warehouse and went to the truck's cab. He returned a moment later clutching two joints between the knuckles of a raised fist.

"Lookit what Santa brought." He jumped back into the building and handed one of the home-rolled to Shane.

The man lit Shane's, then his own, and both men blew white smoke into the Holy Night.

"Not so bad, right?" the Macnasee said. "Yeah, it sucks having to work Christmas, but I'm sure Jimmy's paying you good for this, anyway.... Plus a little bud and rum. Not so bad a way to start the holiday."

"Jimmy isn't paying me anything," Shane replied. He took a drink and passed the bottle.

The man poured rum on smoke then sniffed. "He got something on you? Or you just doing this to jack with your boss?"

"My boss?"

"Yeah. Whoever owns this place. He must be a real asshole have you sneaking around, doing this shit behind his back. No offense, but you look a little old to be a floor jock. What are you, anyway? A manager? Or not even that? You just work here long enough to know everything, is that it?"

"No. *I* own this place. This is *my* warehouse."

An odd feeling of tension entered their space. Shane wondered why. He looked over and the Macnasee's dark eyes were staring at him intensely.

"Well Jimmy didn't tell me that," the Macnasee said. "The owner of the joint would be here."

"Why would he?"

The man shrugged. "He wouldn't. How do you know him?"

"He's my brother-in-law."

A moment passed; and then the man erupted in laughter. He switched his joint to the opposite hand so he could wrap an arm around Shane's shoulder and give him a rowdy side-hug.

"Ho, shit! That damn near makes us family, *Chachi!*" Shane recognized the word as Macnasee slang. It was used as a term of respect or endearment; like *brother*.

"You and Sabrina?" the man continued, chortling. "That is something else, man. That is really something else."

"You know Sabrina?" Shane asked him.

The man shook with laughter as he waved smoke away from their faces. "Oh.... Oh, yeah.... Yeah, we've met."

At that last comment, the man dug an elbow into Shane's side. *Nudge nudge.*

And what the hell is that supposed to mean? Shane's hazy mind wondered.

"Hey, *Chachi*, what do you earn off a place like this?" the Macnasee asked. "Much bank, right?"

"Not.... Not too much. Enough, I guess."

"Enough," the Macnasee barked out a rough laugh. "I thought I had enough once. You know what? It wasn't."

"No."

"Probably a lot of headaches with a place like this anyway," the Macnasee looked around. "Upkeep and taxes and all. Paperwork. Lot of paperwork, right?"

"Some...."

"I'll bet. Hey," the Macnasee stood up. The two other men who had been arraigning the crates had come up behind them and were standing there silently. "We're all set." He reached down and offered a hand to Shane. Shane took it and was pulled to his feet.

The Macnasee toked his joint down to a nub, blew a steady stream from the side of his mouth, and then grinned at Shane.

"I guess I shouldn't just drop this on the floor. Not in front of the owner."

Shane couldn't think of a reply, so he stood dumbly, looking at the fading red ember.

The Macnasee ground the remaining weed into a power between his thumb and fingers, then dusted his hands off outside the bay door. Then he grabbed Shane's hand and gave him a shoulder-bump bro-hug.

"Allright *Chachi*," the Macnasee said. "Merry Christmas."

"Yeah," Shane replied.

The three men exited the warehouse, pulled the ramp back into the truck, and went to the cab.

At the cab's door, the Macnasee turned and said, "So what did Jimmy tell you about the crate?"

Shane shook his head. "Nothing."

"Huh," the Macnasee grunted. "Anyway, it won't be here long. Nobody will even notice it, probably, and if they do.... Well, just keep people away from it, okay?"

Shane nodded.

"Allright *Chachi*." He swung into the truck. The engine rumbled and the vehicle lurched away. Shane watched it roll out of the parking-lot and onto the street; heading towards a bright Christmas star hanging in the crisp night air.

Sitting on a crate; joint in one hand, rum in the other, Shane killed twenty minutes gazing blankly out the open bay door. A chill breeze blew in which caused his eyes to water and blink. The joint had grown cold. Shane dropped the remains into the dregs of the rum and set the bottle aside.

'Yeah, we've met'. Shane recalled the Macnasee's words. *Was that supposed to be funny?*

Did I just get high with one of my wife's ex-lovers?

Ex.... How sure am I about that Ex.?

One of my wife's.... One of how many? Hell, how big an island is Macnas?

Shane sniffled then blew snot from his nose directly onto the concrete floor.

'Right in front of the owner'....

Shane came to his feet too quickly, wobbled, had to put a hand on the crate to steady himself, and then, when the vertigo passed, stood tall and erect.

And what's in that goddamned box anyway.

They'd done a good job squirreling the cargo away. Even though he knew the general location of where they'd been working, Shane had used his own handcart to move a lot of unnecessary wooden crates aside before he uncovered the odd, plastic box.

By the time he had, he was shaking and sweating from the booze, weed and effort.

Shane stood before the box; a curious, coffin shape with what looked like stripped vents on the side and a weird logo or emblem in red stenciled over the black lid. While looking at the bizarre print, the pattern and discord of red on black nauseated Shane. When he squinted, the red seemed to grow more vibrant, and the room hitched and threatened to spin away. Shane grabbed his knees and blew wind. He closed his eyes. "Steady," he whispered to himself.

Shane gulped air. Exhaled deeply. He stood up but didn't look directly at the emblem again. He focused, rather, on the edges - looking for a latch or handle. He didn't see any, so he moved in closer.

The air around the box was colder than the rest of the warehouse. He touched it with a bare hand, and the surface was freezing. Shane pulled the hand back with a hiss

and tucked it under an armpit to press away the chill. Could this be some new technology? A super condensed cooling system?

Shane tried to inspect the back to see if he could spot the refrigeration unit, but if the box had one, it was internal. And, though he wasn't clear-headed, Shane knew that was completely impractical, if not actually impossible.

Also, there was no handle, latch, hinges, screws, seam or any way he could see to open the thing. It appeared to be one piece of molded plastic.

Shane stood back and put his hands on his hips. Again, the emblem blazed - the red swirls seeming to move over the surface - and Shane had to look away.

To hell with this.

Shane went to the storeroom and snatched a heavy crowbar from the toolbox. He staggered back to the coffin shaped box. Was it his imagination or had the crates he'd pushed aside moved in closer. It seemed like he didn't have as much room to maneuver around the box as he'd had just moments ago.

Crazy. Drunk.

Pissed off.

Shane held the crowbar like a spear and jabbed it against the lid of the box.

A plum of fog escaped from the vents. Inside the box, something groaned; like metal being bent or a crank turning over.

Shane wedged the crowbar into one of the vents and pushed. He felt it give, just a little, and the groaning sound intensified.

"Goddamnit....," Shane said. He removed the crowbar and smacked it hard against the side of the box.

The groaning became a wail.

Shane hit the box again.

Thick, black tendrils of plasma seeped from the vents. They curled like corkscrews in the air.

"What the...?" Shane stepped back.

The living smoke hung suspended for a moment. Then, suddenly, it flew at Shane's face, blinding his eyes; filling his mouth and nostrils.

The crowbar clattered against the concrete floor. A moment later, Shane's dead body thumped down next to it.

Yes, Mr. Muncie was indeed a sad, sad specimen. Just think of all the mistakes he'd made; every poor decision and cowardly action taken over the course of so few years that let him to such an end on Christmas Day. But then, you yourself are no stranger to cowardly acts and poor decisions, are you?

Of course. You're right. I promised not to belabor the point. Forgive me, please.

But we still have time. To kill, as they say.

Maybe I can find another stone; another story worth telling here.

In the Christmas Cemetery....